

HOW TO REACH HYPER- BUSY TEENAGERS

BY RICK LAWRENCE

THE OVERSCHEDULED, UNDERMARGINED, WALL-TO-WALL LIFESTYLES OF TODAY'S TEENAGERS PRESENT ENORMOUS OBSTACLES TO EFFECTIVE YOUTH MINISTRY. *Here's how youth leaders from all over North America are not only coping with the challenges but finding ways to forge deeper connections with kids in the midst of them.*

of every week. This works well because every week seems like a lot to teenagers who have a lot on their plates. Plus, they miss attending the group on the off-week and get really excited about it the on-week. Also, hold meetings on a weekend night instead of a weeknight. This works because the youth won't have school the next day and won't feel as bogged down

by schoolwork...especially on a Friday night.

MAKE THEIR LIVES EASIER

(Joey Romero; Hemphill, Texas)

I minister in a small rural church 20 miles from the secondary school. Wednesdays are no longer considered sacred by extracurricular program >>>

A couple of months ago I was invited to speak to a large parents-of-teenagers group at a Christian high school—the topic was “Passionately Pursuing Your Kids.” Early on in the workshop, I led the parents through an experience that helped them assess what their home “climate” was functionally teaching their kids. They had to think about both positive and negative “lessons” their sons and daughters were learning from them—whether consciously or unconsciously.

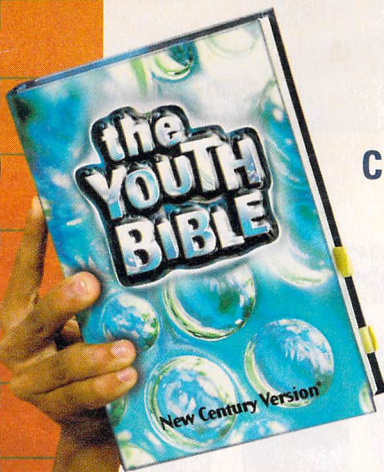
As I was gathering feedback from the parents, a woman stood up and said her children were learning that an overscheduled, hyper-busy lifestyle is the norm. An immediate murmur of agreement washed through the crowd. I asked parents to raise their hand if they believed their home was also teaching this “lesson” to their kids. I saw virtually every hand raised across the room. The hidden curriculum to this lesson, I told them, is that you can't nurture your kids' faith out on the margins of life. A hyper-busy lifestyle assassinates the unhurried moments that are the breeding ground for passing on life's great truths.

And it's these same hyper-busy lifestyles that are putting the squeeze on effective youth ministry. Based on countless conversations with youth leaders, and our own survey feedback, kids' marginless lifestyle is likely your greatest ministry challenge. So we decided to ask youth pastors all over the world how they meet this challenge. And here are their idea-gems.

ADAPT YOUR SCHEDULE

(Kim McGregor; Willowdale, Ontario)

Hold meetings twice a month instead



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»» leaders. After football and band the kids are so exhausted that once they finally get home they're more interested in supper and a couch than Bible study. So we decided to offer to pick them up after their school activities and feed them at church. The parents were relieved they didn't have to drive into town to pick up their children, then fix them supper. We have Bible study and good fellowship time at the church, even though this has not solved the problem of their exhaustion.

USE POPULAR EVENTS TO LEVERAGE DEEPER CONNECTIONS TO KIDS

(Marty Holliday; Floyd, Virginia)

In order to keep teenagers who have way too many other interests (this includes my own two kids), I take them on a summer mission trip every year. To go, the kids must:

1. Stay active in our youth group's activities.
2. Do at least 10 hours of service for our church body (choir, children's church leaders, and so on) from September through May.
3. Do at least 15 hours of community service in our county from September through May.
4. Participate in all fund-raisers for the trip.

These requirements keep kids involved throughout the year—working toward something they highly value and enjoy. Our group changed from one that was blasé about church activities to one that works hard to attend church activities.

USE ONLINE CONNECTIONS AND RESOURCES TO YOUR ADVANTAGE

(Denise Ash; Lesage, West Virginia)

I've been trying for almost a year to set up a Christian leadership seminar for youth in our church. After months of asking, "What day is good for you?" I finally determined that there was no right time. So instead I set it up as an online course. I packaged all the readings and assignments onto CD-ROMs and asked kids to email their responses and ideas to the entire group. It worked like a charm because they could do it on their own time and they love spending time online. The best part of

it is that they have the information on their computers to review at any time!

BE CONSISTENT

(Matthew Gamble; Seattle, Washington)

There are two things that I've found to be extremely fruitful: consistency with spirituality and consistency with reality.

1. Consistency with spirituality—Providing consistent times each week when teenagers know there's something planned to help them get connected to God is vital. I started a weekly Bible study at my house every Friday night so young people could come over, hang out, get some grub, and then dive into God's Word. I didn't have to send out weekly emails—simply telling them that every Friday night something would be happening gave them something to look forward to. We also make sure our consistent events and activities are well done. A high level of excellence, even if it's just a Bible study, empowers those attending to invite their friends, and they don't want to miss a meeting.

2. Consistency with reality—One of the biggest complaints I hear from young people today is that Christianity is not relevant to their lives. We're not reaching the younger generation. Why? In my opinion (and theirs) it's because we're not relevant to them. When was the last time that you saw a high school student carrying any weight on a church board? When was the last time the church board asked young people their opinions about the sermons, the color of the carpet, or the way the finances are distributed? Church is not relevant to young people because they don't experience us caring about them. We must show kids that we value their likes and dislikes.

PLANT YOURSELF IN THEIR TURF

(Ryan Doherty; Richmond, Virginia)

In order to reach students and relate to them, I have to go to their turf on their timetable—and that means showing up at their schools. I have designated Thursdays as "Eat Lunch with Ryan" day. I try to visit each school throughout the months on a rotation. For each student in the youth group that attends that school, I bring some favorite snacks or fast food (of course I bring extra food for their friends). I have talked to each school's principal, and they've all graciously agreed to help me. This has been very beneficial for our youth group. I've met many unchurched students in a nonthreatening environment.

LOVE THEM SO WELL THAT THEY'LL MOVE CHURCH ACTIVITIES TO THE TOP OF THEIR LIST

(Steve Daffron; Staten Island, New York)

I've been in youth ministry for close to 20 years year now. I wish there were a boxed formula for dealing with this universal problem, but there's no such animal! I do believe a key is to simply pour yourself into the lives of the youth and their parents. How does this help deal with "overbusy youth"? Teenagers must see that you have time for them. If they want to hang with you and you don't have time...well, you're just like everyone else. I've had the privilege of serving teenagers from Florida to New York, »»

»» and I've found that they all desire the same thing—they want someone to value them! They want someone who will listen to them without judging them, someone who will love them despite their clothes or hair color. When we love teenagers like that (and I believe Jesus set that example), they'll respond and give you all the time you can handle!

TAKE ADVANTAGE OF THEIR SCHOOL BREAKS

(Ann Lyons; Jacobus, Pennsylvania)

I watch my kids' school calendars, looking for those buffer zones when they're out of school, especially if it's a significant break, such as their midwinter vacation. That's when I plan a local service project. We typically go to a soup kitchen in our town and serve lunch to the homeless. This is popular with both kids and their parents—they know their kids are busy doing something good for others rather than being at home playing video games. I also schedule three-day retreat weekends during kids' school breaks—they're very popular.

EXERT YOUR INFLUENCE OVER THEIR PRIORITIES

(Rebecca Christ; Milwaukee, Wisconsin)

Once I have a relationship with the youth in my group, I teach them the importance of prioritizing their many activities. It's not something that they're often taught at home. Their overbusy lifestyle creates a spiritual struggle—they struggle to put God first when they have so many other commitments. I teach them that in life we must make choices and sometimes great opportunities need to be turned down in order to address the most important aspects in our lives. Typically, I do this in a one-to-one sharing time or in my small-group ministry. I share the effects I've seen in my life when I've overdone it, and I have them journal about their struggles. ■